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AUTHOR Ylvisaker, James
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ABSTRACT

If social studies is going to contribute to the overall qualitative improvement of public schools, educators must agree on a social studies core curriculum for all students. Social studies educators can take credit for having had a role in the maintenance of one of the world's oldest constitutional democracies, and as a national assessment revealed, for the fact that 70 percent of public school students are learning what social studies intends. However, a serious roadblock to dramatic improvement in social studies instruction is the current state of curriculum ambiguity. Teachers need to coalesce around a defined core, which would occupy 50-60 percent of the time allocated for a course, still leaving room for flexibility to respond to student interests, contemporary events, and special teacher strengths. Educators can begin by agreeing that a re-examination of social studies is needed, determining what is taught in classrooms or developing assessment programs, presenting the analysis to the school board, and participating in social studies assessment at the state level. Many professional organizations as well as the ERIC data base offer help in defining a social studies core curriculum. (RM)

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WHAT'S RIGHT WITH THE SOCIAL STUDIES
IS ALSO WHAT'S WRONG

an address by James Ylvisaker
to
Spring Conference of Willamette Valley
Council for the Social Studies
April 9, 1984
Salishan, Oregon

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The social studies field has been getting a bad press lately. Criticisms I have heard include teachers "too liberal" (they used to be "too radical"). hidebound instruction (that's the other side of the same coin), textbook dependent curriculum, what's taught varies too much, students rate interest in social studies low, and resistance to accountability. There are others but this list will suffice, I'm sure.

Before commenting on what I think is a valid criticism in that list, let me note a couple of "chin up" items for social studies teachers.

To begin, it is apparent that the whole field of social studies occupies a special place in the public school curriculum when one examines the purposes of schooling. Historically, the most entrenched and established purpose of schooling is socialization of the country's youth, and social studies has always been assigned a special role in carrying out that purpose. Citizenship education remains today the most often cited responsibility of the social studies.

So, how are we doing socializing American youth? Two indicators are worthy of note:

First, 200 years of constitutional democracy using the same fundamental document is a pretty good run, and I think we can assume that public education has had something to do with it. As the field charged directly with responsibilities in citizenship ed, social studies teachers, I think, can take some of the credit for this rather extraordinary national achievement.

Second, there is some evidence that our public school students are learning a good bit of what social studies intends - approximately 70 percent - by the time they graduate (a little better than that in the West). This bit of data comes from the 1982 National Assessment of Educational Progress test in social studies/citizenship, a national assessment program authorized and monitored by U.S.D.O.E. This program has been around for over a decade and has tested social studies and citizenship three times since 1969.

The 1982 test included a number of the same items used in 1976, allowing comparison of scores which indicates students in 1982 did substantially better than their counterparts in '76. Thirteen year olds were 3% better (61-64%); seventeen year olds were 2% better (68-70%).

This is encouraging news, especially when one notes that most improvement came from disadvantaged groups. At least this is one area where the gap between haves and have nots is narrowing rather than widening.

In brief, 24,400 students were tested from all parts of the country - 10,000 nine year olds, 7,200 thirteen year olds, and 7,200 seventeen year olds. All socio-economic strata were included also. Results are available item by item and data is broken down to show performance by a variety of groups: male/female, area of country, white/black, rural/urban, advantaged/disadvantaged, low achievement/high achievement, grade level.

Of course, to know what 70% means, you would have to know what the tests measure. Suffice it to say here that a national consensus was sought to establish the objectives to be achieved. Teachers, administrators, subject matter experts, and concerned citizens representing a broad range of backgrounds worked together to set objectives that reflect both what they thought should be achieved and what they thought is happening.

So take a bow, social studies teachers. On a broad range of consensus notions regarding what social studies should accomplish, you improved significantly in the last six to eight years.

Now let me deal with one of the criticisms I mentioned at the outset. The title of this address is, WHAT'S RIGHT IS ALSO WHAT'S WRONG, and of course this is a point of view and one that may be controversial, but let's see.

Here's my thesis, connecting what's right with what's wrong. The 25-year period of innovation and experimentation in social studies we have been through has resulted in institutionalizing "curricular ambiguity". Instead of finding and institutionalizing improved practices to strengthen citizenship education, we have made only weak efforts to generalize our individual conclusions and instead have been satisfied to "do our own thing" and let others do theirs.

But the innovators have not been the majority. I'd say 60 to 75 percent of those teaching social studies are content to rely on the textbook, talk about higher level thinking skills, and test for comprehension and recall of facts.

While on the surface we have a "social studies program" described broadly at the state level and more specifically in district level guides, when you actually map what goes on in social studies classrooms there is great diversity in what is taught and learned.

We are, to too great an extent, a profession of either apprentices relying on the book, or specialists with primary allegiance to our own personally developed niches within the broad field of social studies. Curricular ambiguity describes a situation where the strongest teachers have had the flexibility to do outstanding things, while the weakest have had the freedom to do very little, with no accountability.

I believe we have in many ways reformed and improved social studies teaching through the long years of experimentation. Most every one in this audience probably has experience in one or another pedagogical, curricular or structural innovation such as team teaching, interdisciplinary approaches in history teaching, topical or strand approaches in history teaching, infusing law related, environmental, economic & multicultural concepts, issues/problems approaches, simulation, moral dilemmas, values clarification, short term electives, making maximum use of community learning resources, using the newer disciplines as replacement for the older ones to study society the way it really is, and the list could go on much further.

What's wrong is we haven't taken the logical final step in the experimentation process. We haven't seriously asked the question:

OK now, which of these new approaches, content configurations, methods, etc, are worth using with all the kids?

Because if we can't answer that question, we don't really have a program and that's anarchy - and I just don't think it'll wash any longer.

As an aside - isn't it ironic that most of us I think would accept citizenship ed as the most fundamental purpose of social studies - and certainly the public would agree, and expect it to mean educating folks who can carry on the best of the culture's traditions. Certainly put in a negative way that includes serving as a bulwark against disintegrative tendencies which would threaten continuity. Perhaps anarchy is most feared and therefore what we are supposed to be helping guard against in social studies. But as a matter of fact we not only tolerate it in the way we practice by studiously avoiding sharing our "good stuff" so as not to interfere with the sanctity of our colleagues' worlds, some of us promote it as a desirable end in itself.

What is needed now if social studies is going to contribute to the overall qualitative improvement of public schools, here in Oregon and all over the country, is to finally agree on a core of social studies learning that all kids should get.

If we, as teachers, teacher educators, and administrators with curriculum management responsibility, don't get together to do this soon, I know who will: the measurement people. I have a friend in measurement who is fond of pointing out, "If curriculum leaves a vacuum, measurement will rush in to fill it".

Assessment is coming, district wide and state wide, and the tests are not going to be custom designed to reflect the idiosyncracies of individual classrooms. To get started, I would strongly recommend that you undertake to find out in your own districts to what extent what is taught is congruent with what is intended, get it squared up and then insist that any assessment of social studies be with test items keyed to the goals of the official curriculum.

And this doesn't have to strap you down to a lock step, boring march through a subject with no flexibility for following student interest or taking advantage of particular teacher strengths.

In my view, teaching the "core" needn't occupy more than 50-60 percent of the time allocated for a subject or course. The teacher's task is to work out a reasonable compromise within your own bailiwick. But the point is, that in geography for instance, it should no longer be a matter of the luck of the draw as to whether a student studies latitude & longitude, spends one week on the Soviet Union and three on Europe, or learns through simulation the dynamic interplay of geographical factors responsible for a community's unique development, as in the High School Geography Project.

There desperately needs to be agreement on core goals in all required areas of social studies and real commitment on the part of teachers to see that they are carried out.

And that, I submit will make social studies look damn good to a highly skeptical public and do more to solidify the importance of social studies in the overall curriculum than anything else we can do.

So here's a formula for taking what's right in your district and eliminating what's wrong:

1st Agree in principle that a re-examination of the social studies program with an eye to establishing, revising, or reaffirming the CORE is needed and must be done cooperatively with teachers and administrators

2nd Map the taught social studies curriculum to determine variations in what is taught from classroom to classroom within required subjects or courses, **OR**, if your district has a well defined social studies curriculum and you think it is taught, develop an assessment program that tests students with items directly related to the program's goals.

3rd Share either the mapping or the test results with teachers and get together to analyze and discuss. Use the analysis as a basis for adjusting the core goals and the tests, then run it by the Board for their input and approval.

4th Assure all teachers that the process will be repeated and results compared.

- Initiate comparison of social studies regionally
- 5th** and prepare to participate in a state wide definition and assessment.
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At this point, many of you may well be thinking, what about resources? Isn't it going to take a monumental effort to define a social studies core and where do we start? Actually, we are not without considerable help available. Here are some resource suggestions:

- * Use the ERIC/CHESS Clearinghouse to identify district and state guides that have spelled out a social studies core. The concern isn't so new that this hasn't been done. Some of it is in bits and pieces, such as Salem's fine Global Studies curriculum, but very useful as building blocks for the whole structure. All ERIC/CHESS resources are on microfiche at the NWREL, at ODE, and PSU and U of O. If you aren't at all familiar with the National ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) network, call me at 255-1841 and I'll send you information.
- * An excellent resource is the set of objectives that underlay the 1982 NAEP social studies/citizenship test. The objectives, items and analysis of results are all available for a minimal charge from Education Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. Call toll free 1-800-223-0267 to order.
- * Check the April/May issue of Social Education Journal of the National Council for the Social Studies. It contains a recommended scope and

sequence which was developed through extensive involvement of teachers as well as leaders in the field and is well worth a look.

- * Check the publications catalog of SSEC (Social Science Education Consortium). You will find a number of helpful publications including seven report documents from Project SPAN (Social Studies Priorities, Practices, and Needs). SSEC address is 855 Broadway, Boulder, Colorado 80302.
- * For theoretical and philosophical support to back up the need for a closely coupled curriculum, see any of the articles written by Fenwick English over the last several years in most major ed journals. A good summary of his thought and advice regarding curriculum management is found in occasional paper #30, published by the Council for Basic Education, entitled "Improving Curriculum Management in the Schools". The cost is \$2.00. Order from CBE, 725 Fifteenth Street, NW, Washington D.C., 20005.
- * My thesis is supported also by research done by Philip Cusick, entitled, "A Study of Networks Among Professional Staffs in Secondary Schools." This report is available by writing IRT, 252 Erickson, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824.
- * Multnomah ESD has ready for pilot testing this spring, assessment instruments in U.S. history grades 5, 8 and 11, and geography, grade 7. These were developed through the efforts of a consortium of local districts and reflect what is common in those areas among the

participating districts. Write Bob Pratt, Social Studies Specialist, Multnomah ESD, 220 SE 102nd Avenue, Portland, 97216.

- * Let's not forget the national reports. Three that I have found especially useful because they are based on research, not conjecture, are these:

Earnest Boyer, High School, A Report on Secondary Education in America, commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Harper & Row, 1983.

TheodoreSizer, Horace's Compromise, the Dilemma of the American High School, commissioned by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Houghton Mifflin, 1984.

John Goodlad, A Place Called School, Prospects for the Future, McGraw Hill, 1984.

Perhaps the most important resource of all, however, is what you have going right here in a close-to-home, professional organization made up of friends and colleagues with whom you can commiserate, argue, share, develop and advocate social studies.

Without WVCSS and others like it, you have no effective voices to influence and respond to issues and initiatives larger than those of your local district.

And of course, you have heard about Supt. Duncan's "Action Plan for Excellence". Having served on TASK FORCE A, addressing a statewide curriculum, I can tell you that the state is serious about establishing a core curriculum and ASSESSING IT!

Your organization, the WVCSS, will, I am sure, have the opportunity to be significantly involved in the tough work of determining what is core in social studies across the state.

In conclusion, I have said we can proudly take credit for having had a role in the maintenance of one of the world's oldest constitutional democracies.

I've reported how we're doing on national assessment - better than 1976 - however, there remains a great deal of room for more improvement.

I've set before you my thesis that a serious roadblock to dramatic improvement is the current state of "curriculum ambiguity" and it's peculiar characteristics which may be more evident in the social studies than any other area of the curriculum.

I have argued that what is needed is to coalesce around a defined CORE for the social studies, a core that still leaves room for flexibility to respond to student interests, the swirl of contemporary events and special teacher strengths.

I mentioned some resources useful to the task and pointed out the special importance of your professional association in shaping and conditioning the definition of the social studies core curriculum.

My main emphasis has been to urge greater curriculum alignment in social studies as opposed to trying to defend the current ambiguous situation. But alignment is really just a quick fix.

Longer term reform is needed to generalize good practice. The present mood and the moves that are being made to respond to the national reports and public interest in education, present both a challenge and an opportunity. We can complete the unfinished social studies reform agenda now by using the call for greater curriculum standardization and alignment to improve the social studies experiences of all our students. If testing is the main leverage for accomplishing this, then so be it. We certainly haven't done it on our own.